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New immigration law makes Christian charity illegal, say church leaders

by Catholic News Service

Immigration and the Church

MOBILE, Ala. (CNS) -- Alabama's new immigration law will affect "every part" of undocumented immigrants' lives and make "the exercise of our Christian religion" illegal, Mobile's archbishop said in an Aug. 1 letter to Catholics.

"Both supporters and opponents of the law agree that it is the broadest and strictest immigration law in the country," he said.

Mobile Archbishop Thomas J. Rodi, Bishop Robert J. Baker of the Catholic Diocese of Birmingham, Bishop Henry N. Parsley Jr. of the Episcopal Diocese of Alabama and Methodist Bishop William H. Willimon have joined together in a lawsuit challenging the law, which is supposed to take effect Sept. 1.

The religious leaders filed the suit in Birmingham Aug. 1. The U.S. Justice Department filed suit the same day to stop the law, and a week before the Southern Poverty Law Center, the American Civil Liberties Union and other groups also filed a legal challenge.

Provisions of the law, among other things, allow police to detain anyone they suspect is undocumented and mandates criminal penalties for people who transport undocumented migrants.

Rep. Mike Hubbard, speaker of the state House of Representatives, said in a statement the law will be enacted despite the legal action taken against it. If changes are needed in the law, they will be made, he said, "but Alabama is not going to be a sanctuary state for illegal immigrants."

The Pew Hispanic Center estimates that about 120,000 undocumented immigrants live in Alabama. News

outlets have reported that many Hispanic immigrants seem to be leaving the state in advance of enforcement of the law. There are similar fears next door in Georgia, which also has enacted a similarly tough law, though some provisions have been held up in court.

The Alabama law "attacks our very understanding of what it means to be a Christian," Rodi said in his letter. "(It) prohibits almost everything which would assist an undocumented immigrant or encourage an undocumented immigrant to live in Alabama."

Baker said in a statement the law "aims to shut the doors of our churches and social ministries, against our wills, to a whole class of people, denying them access to such basic human needs as food clothing, shelter and, most importantly, worship of God.

Parsley and Willimon, who is presiding bishop of the Birmingham area of the North Alabama Conference of the United Methodist Church, issued their own statements echoing that sentiment.

About 338,000 Alabama residents belong to the Episcopal, Methodist and Catholic churches; the Catholic population of the state is about 101,000.

Rodi said the law "makes it illegal for a Catholic priest to baptize, hear the confession of, celebrate the anointing of the sick with, or preach the word of God to, an undocumented immigrant. Nor can we encourage them to attend Mass or give them a ride to Mass."

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Churches cannot let undocumented immigrants "attend adult Scripture study groups, or attend CCD or Sunday school classes," the archbishop continued. "It is illegal for the clergy to counsel them in times of difficulty or in preparation for marriage. It is illegal for them to come to Alcoholic Anonymous meetings or other recovery groups at our churches.

"The law prohibits almost every activity of our St. Vincent de Paul chapters or Catholic social services," he said. "If it involves an undocumented immigrant, it is illegal to give the disabled person a ride to the doctor; give food or clothing or financial assistance in an emergency; allow them to shop at our thrift stores or to learn English; it is illegal to counsel a mother who has a problem pregnancy, or to help her with baby food or diapers, thus making it far more likely that she will choose abortion."

Rodi said the responsibility for controlling and regulating the U.S. borders "is the responsibility, first and foremost, of the federal government."

He said some argue the federal government has not done enough to control illegal immigration and that frustration with the lack of action by Congress on immigration reform has given rise to state laws, such as the one passed in Alabama.

"However, the church is not in charge of our borders," Rodi said. "We do not determine who enters our country. But once immigrants are in our midst, the church has a moral obligation, intrinsic to the living out of our faith, to be Christ-like to everyone."

People of faith, "as Americans and as citizens of Alabama," have a constitutional right to worship freely but also have a right to the "free exercise" of religion.

"'Free exercise' means that, when we leave church on Sunday, we have the right to exercise our faith in

our daily lives. This new law prevents us as believers from exercising our life of faith as commanded by the Lord Jesus," he added.

In Michigan, the Catholic bishops called on the federal government "to enact and enforce laws that treat migrant peoples with the same dignity as its native-born citizens."

Like Archbishop Rodi, they noted that the lack of "a cohesive and effective federal policy on immigration that addresses the common good for all peoples in the country" has led individual states to address the issue.

In a statement released by the Michigan Catholic Conference, the bishops said that if the state Legislature takes it up, any immigration measure it considers "must strive to: uphold the human dignity of all persons and work against any injustice which would compromise the dignity of immigrants; promote and give priority to the reunification of families; (and) recognize the rich contribution to the community by those immigrants and migrants who work and live here."

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